TL3507-06

Statement delivered to the Fourth Committee of

the United Nations General Assembly

Comissao dos Refugiados de Timor Oriental

- Father Francisco Maria Fernandes, President
- Father Apolinario Guterres, Acting President

October 1979

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

The magnitude of the human tragedy in East Timor is so alarming that the international community can no longer be indifferent to it.

The distinguished members of this General Assembly have already been informed of the problems involved in attempting to achieve a suitable political solution in East Timor. Now we would like to direct your attention to the humanitarian situation in our country.

First, we would like to introduce ourselves. We are not members of any of the East Timorese political parties. We are Catholic priests who represent the East Timor Refugee Committee in Portugal. In October of 1976 we were forced to leave Timor by the Indonesians because we had issued an appeal to the Royal Netherlands Ambassador in Jakarta on behalf of East Timorese in West Timor, requesting his assistance in evacuating these people to Portugal.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

As Catholic priests we cannot be silent about the horrifying tragedy which is taking place in East Timor. At the beginning of the crisis in our country in 1975, at the time of the UDT coup and the subsequent civil war, we were living close to the border with Indonesian West Timor. In order to escape the fighting, together with roughly 20,000 of our countrymen we sought refuge near the Indonesian town of Atambua. There, I was elected Chairman of the East Timor Refugee Committee. Our work was concerned with the welfare of the refugees. Throughout the following year we had close contact with the local Indonesian authorities, both civilian and military. Many of the refugees who later were sent to Portugal have already reported their experiences in the refugee camps to Mr. James Dunn, who two years ago testified before the United Nations. We would now like to present to you our account of these experiences.

Between September of 1975 and March of 1976 the refugees in Atambua were treated well by the Indonesian authorities. They welcomed us with all facilities and abundant food supplies. But in March their policy changed quickly and dramatically. In that month, Foreign Minister Adam Malik (now Indonesia's Vice President) visited Atambua. The Indonesians requested that we ensure that all of the refugees attend a rally carrying Indonesian flags and requesting integration into Indonesia. However, we were not willing to force them to do so. Instead, we told each person to choose. Consequently, only 2,000 of the 20,000 refugees went to the rally, and only a much smaller number made a display of support for integration. Malik and other Indonesian officials were visibly angry at the failure of their rally.

We paid dearly for our refusal to support integration. Almost immediately, the Indonesian authorities began to reduce our food supplies. In April these supplies were completely cut off and the refugees were not given the opportunity to grow their own food. Because of this food shortage life became very hard. Many people died. In order to survive, the refugees were forced to sell their belongings at extremely low prices- everything from automobiles to wedding rings to clothing. Moreover, they were forced to do hard labor for criminally low wages- 100 rupiahs each day, twenty-five U.S. Cents. In the camp in Wedomo, West Timor, the Indonesian authorities forced the refugees to labor in ricefields all day without any remuneration, just small amounts of food. This continued for six months, at the end of which time each person was given no more than ten kilograms of the harvest. We did our best to protect the refugees, but outside of Atambua we had little influence.

After Adam Malik's visit, the Indonesian policy was that there were no longer any refugees in West Timor. Refugees did not exist because East Timor was now a part of Indonesia. The authorities announced that we would be sent to Dili, the capital of East Timor. In the end of March all of the priests in Atambua were sent to Dili for twenty days, during which time the Indonesian authorities attempted to brainwash the refugees. We had been told that we had been summoned to Dili by the Bishop there, but in fact this was a lie. We quickly learned that conditions in Dili were much worse than those in Atambua. The war was raging all around, with soldiers and tanks everywhere. The people of the city were forced to take refuge in the churches night and day for their security. In particular, they had to protect their women from the Indonesian soldiers, who raped at will. Warships arrived in the harbor with troops and equipment for the war effort and returned to Indonesia loaded with looted goods. But never did they bring food for the starving people. We priests returned to ~~Dili~~ Atambua convinced that our refugees could not survive in Dili.

During the Spring of 1976 Adam Malik announced that FRETILIN no longer constituted a threat to Indonesian security, and in response FRETILIN launched a major counter-offensive. One series of attacks along the border resulted in a mass exodus of tens of thousands of West Timorese into Atambua. This led to Indonesian accusations that the refugees were spies working for FRETILIN. In a camp in Lamaknan, West Timor many of our countrymen were executed.

Life became even harder for us. If it had not been for the assistance provided by our fellow churchmen, many more refugees would have died.

In May of 1976 we sent an appeal to the Royal Netherlands Ambassador in Jakarta which had to be carried by hand due to Indonesian censorship of all mail from Timor. We asked for his assistance in arranging to evacuate the refugees to Portugal. We did not want to leave our country. However, it was clear that we could not survive in either Atambua or Dili. His Excellency the Netherlands Ambassador arranged for all refugees in Atambua to go to Portugal, and for this we are extremely grateful. However, just two days before the Ambassador visited us to finalize these arrangements, seven thousand of our countrymen were forced to move to Batugade, an East Timorese town of three hundred people just across the border. Thus they were unable to go to Portugal.

The conditions in Batugade are the worst in East Timor : No water, malaria-infested and extremely hot. Some of those moved there sent word that they believed that the Indonesians wanted them to die. Five months ago we received a letter from Batugade which stated that these people are still forced to remain there. After more than three years many have died.

Between August and September of 1976, despite all threats from the Indonesian authorities, nearly 1,600 of us who had remained in Atambua were flown to Portugal. We requested permission to stay behind to continue our work. However, the Indonesians gave us three hours to leave the country and told us that they could not guarantee our safety if we remained. Seven hundred Portuguese passports were issued at that time for close relatives of the refugees to be flown to Portugal. Most of these people were in Dili. However, they were never allowed to go to Portugal even though there were planes waiting for them. The only people who were allowed to travel from East Timor to Portugal at that time were a handful of ethnic Chinese who paid bribes.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

Our reason for discussing these events of 1976 in such detail is to make clear to you the extent of the suffering of the East Timorese people now. The indignities and abuse to which we were subjected as refugees in Indonesian West Timor cannot be compared to the utter brutality that Indonesia has inflicted upon our countrymen since 1976. We are talking about genocide.

A number of speakers at recent sessions have already described many of the firsthand accounts of the killing, disease and starvation now so horribly commonplace in East Timor. It is clear that our country's population has declined precipitously, and is continuing to do so. Church officials recently reported that "an increasing death toll seems to be a general phenomenon all over the villages in East Timor."For example, in the town of Maubisse there was a population of 9,607 in 1976, but by 1979 this figure had declined to 4,586. More important, the rate of death seems to be accelerating. The church report states that one district head reported 164 deaths in his district during 1978. Between January and mid-March of this year 120 people died.

The hundreds of thousands of refugees who have come down from the mountains during the past year appear to be suffering the worst. In Ermera, it is reported that the death toll is so high that the people use the expression, "the more refugees, the more corpses." Church officials report that 300 people die each month in this camp.

In April of this year an International Red Cross delegation was permitted to travel to East Timor, where it visited thirteen villages and camps. In a communication of August 21 the ICRC estimated that 60,000 people were "in a state of alarming malnutrition, among them some 20,000 dying of hunger and 5,000 in need of specific medical treatment." A relief official of the United States government who visited our country during September reported that conditions were amongst the worst he had ever witnessed. According to this official, 200,000 people are severely affected by the present conditions, and 25,000 will probably die despite relief efforts.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

The aid that has been designated for East Timor will not be sufficient to meet either the shortterm or longterm demands of this crisis. Most of the people of our country have not received any aid due to the inaccessibility of their camps and, in particular, because of widespread Indonesian official corruption. For example, it is reported that in Maubisse the people are dying for lack of medicine while medical assistance sent from Australia and New Zealand is on sale in local shops at exorbitant prices.

Recently both the International Red Cross and Catholic Relief Services announced that they would be providing emergency relief assistance to East Timor. Why has it taken the Indonesian government so long to sanction this humanitarian aid ? As much as we welcome these programs, they are still extremely limited. Moreover, they are shortterm programs. What will be done to meet the needs of the East Timorese people in six months ? We must emphasize that we are not criticizing either of these two organizations. Rather, we direct our criticism at the Indonesian government.

The budget for the International Red Cross program shows that one-half of its funds must be spent on helicopters to transport aid around East Timor. This is money that will go directly to the Indonesian government. Indonesia has planes and helicopters to kill our people, but helicopters to help them must be leased for profit.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates,

The Indonesian Government would like you to believe that the war it is waging in our country has ended. This is simply untrue. Indonesia's war of saturation bombing and indiscriminate killing continues unabated. The Indonesian military holds the power in our country. The East Timorese in so-called positions of authority have as much power as an unloaded gun. In the areas under Indonesian control the occupying forces continue to act like the Nazis in occupied Europe during World War II.

According to reports that have been complied by the Australian Relief Agency Action for World DEvelopment, disappearances and executions without trial are commonplace. The Indonesian authorities have approximately forty prisons in East Timor. In Dili there are four: The Military Prisons in Balide and Vila Verde, the Intelligence Prison in Farol and the Army Prison in Colmera. There are three prisons in each of the twelve administrative centers outside of Dili. Little is known about conditions inside of these prisons, but since 1976 many terrible stories about torture have penetrated Indonesia's curtain of secrecy. If you consider the reports about political imprisonment in Indonesia that have been published by organizations like Amnesty International, then there should be little doubt about the situation in our country.

According to letters from East Timor, there are literally thousands of Timorese who want to emigrate to Australia or Portugal, but they are not allowed to leave. Even those who already have tickets in hand to join their wives, husbands, children and parents in Australia are refused exit permits by the Indonesian authorities. Instead, they are considered to be foreigners in their own country and are discriminated against in every conceivable way, even losing their jobs.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates,

We would like to appeal to you to press the Indonesians on the following points:

1. That they allow more international aid officials to operate directly in East Timor. As of now, International Red Cross and Catholic Relief Service officials only have limited access. This would eliminate much of the corruption which is contributing to the death of many of our countrymen.

2. To allow those who want to leave East Timor to join their families abroad. We launch a special appeal to our neighbour Australia, on whose behalf 50,000 of our people sacrificed their lives during World War II, to expedite the reunion of separated families and to provide direct relief aid. This aid should no longer be channeled through the Indonesian authorities.

We appeal to the Indonesian Government, whose Pancasila philosophy is based on humanitarian principles, to abide by these principles and stop the genocidal slaughter of our people.

If our appeals for immediate aid are not met, we can assure the delegates of this Assembly that they will witness one of the worst

tragedies in modern history. Within a few years the last of the East Timorese people will disappear from this Earth, possibly to be replaced by Indonesian settlers. I assure you that the blood and tears of the hundreds of thousands of our countrymen in East Timor who have been killed or who have died of hunger and disease will not be forgotten. God will not be indifferent to their suffering. He will certainly punish this genocide.

To conclude, we would like to read to you an excerpt from the speech made before this General Assembly on 2 October by His Holiness Pope John Paul II:

"The Universal Declaration of Human Rights - with its train of many declarations on highly important aspects of human rights, in favour of children, of women, of equality between races, and especially the two international covenants on economic, social and cultural rights and on civil and political rights - must remain the basic value of the United Nations Organization with which the consciences of its members must be confronted and from which they must draw continual inspiration. If the truths and principles contained in this document were to be forgotten or ignored and were thus to lose the genuine self-evidence that distinguished them at the time they were brought painfully to birth, then the noble purpose of the United Nations Organization could be faced with the threat of a new destruction."

On behalf of the people of East Timor - and in particular the children of our country - we thank you for your indulgence in listening to our appeal for humanitarian aid and human rights.